



The French Colonial Imagination: Writing the Indian Uprisings, 1857-1858, from Second Empire to Third Republic (After the Empire: The Francophone World and Postcolonial France)

Nicola Frith

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The Indian uprisings (1857–58) against British rule in India represent an iconic period within the history of anti-colonial resistance. Numerous works have considered these historical events from British and Indian perspectives, but none have yet questioned how they were viewed by Britain’s foremost colonial rival in India, the French. *The French Colonial Imagination* examines how the potential for Britain to lose its most lucrative colony at the hands its own colonial “subjects” allowed French writers to envisage a world freed from British dominance. The uprisings offered the attractive possibility that France could undergo a colonial revival in the wake of British defeat, thereby reversing the devastating losses inflicted upon France’s former empire at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Notable among these losses was Britain’s decision (in the Treaty of 1814) to permanently reduce France’s presence in India to five small trading posts scattered around the periphery of British territory. The extent to which to the French colonial imagination of the nineteenth century was shaped by the memories of such defeats forms a primary concern of this monograph. This investigation into French responses to the Indian uprisings reveals that French colonial discourse was determined as much by its visions of the colonized “other,” as by the dominance of their British rivals.

Drawing from journalistic, historical, political, and fictional texts written during Louis Napoleon’s Second Empire (1852–70) and in the early years of the Third Republic (1870–1944), *The French Colonial Imagination* shows how the uprisings gave French writers the opportunity to speak out against the rapacity of British colonialism and its treatment of colonized Indians, while simultaneously constructing a competing colonial discourse that would justify further expansion in North Africa and South East Asia. Standing at a crossroads between the “loss” of *Ancien Régime*’s empire and the Third Republic’s ideological investment in overseas expansion, this understudied period of colonial history reveals the centrality of loss, fracture, and political emasculation as core preoccupations haunting the French colonial discourse in its quest to regain cultural and ideological ascendancy over its greatest political enemy.

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